Oral History Interview

Geoffrey Brown (b. 1930)

Interviewed by Dave Smith | 15th August 2023

Audio: Geoffrey Brown b. 1930 — Grimsby, butterfly bomb survivor, trolley bus driver.mp3

Note: This transcript was generated automatically in Microsoft Word and may contain inaccuracies. Speech has been retained as spoken to preserve local dialect and accent.

Summary

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Geoffrey Brown, born 1930 at 12 Chelmsford Avenue, Grimsby, was interviewed by local amateur historian Dave Smith in August 2023 at the age of 93. The centrepiece of the interview is his remarkable first-hand account of the Grimsby butterfly bomb raid of June 1943, in which he unknowingly picked up an unexploded SD-2 device while shrapnel-hunting as a 13-year-old, kicked it home along Littlefield Lane, and only narrowly avoided catastrophe when a passing bomb disposal lorry detonated it on his own doorstep. Around 82 people were killed in the raid that morning, yet it was suppressed from the news.
Beyond the butterfly bombs, Geoff recalls wartime street life in Grimsby — Anderson shelters, searchlights, dogfights, Italian POWs at Weelsby — alongside vivid memories of the town's cinemas, theatres, and dance halls. He also gives a detailed account of his working life: apprentice motor mechanic, army service, trolley bus conductor and driver for Grimsby Corporation, coach driver, fish haulage lorry driver, and finally taxi driver and firm chairman. Throughout, he speaks warmly of the tight-knit community of Chelmsford Avenue and the world that has since disappeared.

Geoffrey Brown reunited with a 'butterfly' bomb 80 years after kicking one around. The bomb on the left of the picture is an original whereas the one on the right side is a 3D printed version showing it open.

Transcript

Dave: Right, so today is the 15th of August, 2023. Can I ask your permission to use this recording publicly for anybody that may be interested?

Geoff: Yeah, no problem, yeah.

Dave: That's fine. And what's your name, please?

Geoff: Geoffrey Brown.

Dave: Right. And what's your year of birth, Geoff?

Geoff: 1930.

Dave: So you're now aged 93 then?

Geoff: 93, yeah.

Dave: Yeah. Where was you born?

Geoff: Pardon?

Dave: Where was you born?

Geoff: Across the road. Number 12, Chelmsford Avenue.

Dave: That's fine then, yeah. And where did you actually live as a child — was it at number 12 Chelmsford Avenue?

Geoff: Where did I live what?

Dave: As a child.

Geoff: I spent all my... till I got married, I was at number 12 Chelmsford Avenue, which is just across the road, opposite Chelmsford Place.

Dave: What can you remember about your house? How many people lived there?

Geoff: Three of us — me mother and father. And I had a granddad that lived with us for a while, but he died in the house.

Dave: What did you do with other children in your neighbourhood when you was a child?

Geoff: Well, it was mostly wartime. I spent — from what would it be when the war broke out? Nine-year-old, 1930, and it started in 1939. So, before that, my father was a fisherman from Yarmouth originally, met my mother and lived in Alexander Road, but they eventually moved to Chelmsford Avenue. But Chelmsford Avenue then was completely different to what it is today — it was all fields. Littlefield Lane was unadopted, and as children we played a lot in Littlefield Lane because it's all fields. Even the top end now where you turn into Chelmsford Avenue — the waterworks, which is still over there — was a field. There was a football stadium that belonged to Grimsby Police who played on it. The field's still there, by the way, just across the way from here.

As children, we walked down Chelmsford Place — we didn't have to do what you have to do now because it was a field — into a place called Carson Avenue and then Corinthian. Carson Avenue, when the war broke out, they'd just laid the road, they hadn't

even finished it. There was a few houses built, with cottages where the black house is still there. I got friendly with the man there and used to go to the black house quite a lot, me and my wife. He looked after the allotments — he was a caretaker for them.

Dave: Do you know why the black house was built?

Geoff: No. I know it was used later on, after the war, for the allotments. The man that got it — I was quite friendly with him, he lived in Hainton Avenue — him and his wife moved in as a caretaker. But I always knew the black house because it's been there as far back as I can remember. There's a set of trees around it.

Anyway, can I just go back to what we used to do as children? We used to get a lot of raids here — not Grimsby specifically, the Luftwaffe was going over, blitzing Hull, Sheffield, places like that — but they had to come over here. So, there were two anti-aircraft stations, one on the north wall, and one just where you go off Little Coates Road...

Dave: Is it Toothill? Further that way?

Geoff: No, further this way. Where Cambridge Road is now — if you cross the road, there's another road where the school is. You'd usually walk down to the bridge.

Dave: Yes.

Geoff: And it comes out on Broadway. That's it. Right, we've got it. Well, there was an anti-aircraft gun stationed there, and there was also — now this is surprising — at the oak tree, there was a big gun. I know it was a Scottish regiment, and it fired out to sea. It was one of these really massive guns; it wasn't there for too long, but it was definitely there.

So why I'm telling you this — because when these raids came, quite a lot of us used to go shrapnel hunting, looking for bits of shells from the anti-aircraft guns. They were firing loads of them; they came over nearly every night in the early part of the war, 1941, '42. We lived in the Anderson shelter — we always went in there because the sirens would go every night. I can always remember seeing that great red glow over Hull when they were blitzing it.

So this particular morning, me and this girl I was friendly with round the block — we was only 13 — we was shrapnel hunting. We came to Dixon's Paper Mills, which is still there. It had a football field, cricket field, and a tennis court right next to it — their sports ground, Dixon's, you know. And I'm walking down there and I see on the grass, just outside, something I wasn't sure about. It was a bit of metal. It was a butterfly bomb that had come down, but I didn't know that at the time. That morning 80-odd people had been killed by them across the town, but this one had come down and not opened properly — the casing was still round it. I threw

something at it, don't ask me why, and I thought, oh, I'll pick that up, a bit of shrapnel like. Well, I didn't know it was a bomb, obviously.

There was a soldier nearby. I said to him, 'What's this, mate?' He opened his jackknife — army knife, with a big prong on — and he tried to open the bomb, tried to unclamp it. He didn't succeed, but then he says, 'Here, you have it.' So, I kicked it along, kicked it quite a bit along the road. This girl who'd been with me, she took it into her house first — she lived just around the corner on Littlefield Lane, in one of them terraced houses. But her dad wouldn't let her keep it. So, she brought it back and I wrapped it round the corner and took it in. My dad was in.

'Get that out of here and out of this house.' He didn't know what it was exactly — nobody ever mentioned butterfly bombs; it just looked like a canister, a bit of metal. Well, you know what they were — they came down with wings, didn't they? This one hadn't opened right, it was still clamped, and neither of us could get it undone. So I'm stood on the doorstep with it in my hand, just going to get rid of it, when a bomb disposal lorry came past with an officer checking all the gardens down the street. He saw me. 'Drop it!' he says. And I'm stood on the bloody doorstep.

With hindsight, I could have just walked across the road to a bit of green and it wouldn't have done any damage. But they sandbagged it up right there on the doorstep and blew it up. It blew the front door in and the windows — ours and a couple of neighbours. That's my story. How lucky was I — especially with that soldier. I'd been kicking it along the road! It's queer, but there we are.

Dave: You know when the butterfly raid had ended — was the town in panic?

Geoff: No, I don't think so. I'm only giving you what we knew at the time — and we couldn't understand why it was never on the news. We all relied on the radio, but it was never, ever mentioned. But we were told — I heard my parents talking — I think 82 died that morning, mainly people cycling to work: milkmen, railway people, early morning workers. And I thought, I'm going to get the biggest hiding I've ever had in my life. It blew the front windows — not just ours, next door and I think one across the road. The sandbagging was done right on the doorstep.

Dave: And that was at number 12, Chelmsford?

Geoff: Number 12, yeah.

Dave: Were people scared to go out immediately after the raid?

Geoff: No, I don't think so. I can't think of anybody that was. I know what I say, but at my age — we thought it was exciting. People said, 'Was you scared?' I said, 'No, no.' My granddad used to give us a running commentary of the German planes coming in. We were in an air raid shelter one night and one dived down and dropped a bomb at Chelmsford School — made a great big crater. They got rid of it eventually, but it was used for a bit as a sort of a theatre while. Just past the shops here on the left — it's Franklin College now.

What I think happened — what we believed — was the plane was trying to get out of the searchlights that had got hold of it. Because as soon as they got hold of one, all the searchlights zoomed in so the anti-aircraft guns could fire up at it. But I don't think it was very successful, from what I ever knew. I can't remember any German planes being shot down — not over here anyway.

Dave: Were people confused about the bomb? You said you didn't know it was a bomb at the time.

Geoff: Yeah, nobody did. My father didn't. This girl — she only lived round the corner — it just looked like a canister to her too, which it was in a way. Flat round, it was. The people that got killed were the people where the bombs had come down properly and they'd touched the ball — the big ball inside. I know all about it now because I know this one was faulty. It was faulty. But we were very, very lucky, weren't we?

Dave: Very lucky. Did you find that soon after the raid there was a lot of military personnel came into the town to do a massive search?

Geoff: Well, that's what was happening with me. There was a big army lorry going up and down, checking all the gardens with an officer in front. It was just coincidence that I opened the door at the right moment and he saw me with it in my hand. They were checking everywhere, because of what had been dropped.

I believe — you might know better than me — somebody once told me that Grimsby was the only one to be hit on that scale. Somebody mentioned Ipswich having a few, I think, but not like what Grimsby got. Which is why they kept it out of the news — it had to be experimental, didn't it? That's why they kept quiet about it.

I did get a mention in the paper because the Telegraph came here. And then a French woman came a few years later from Paris — she was researching the butterfly bomb. She was quite thorough — she went to London; there was a big event she organised. She wrote it all up; it's there if you want to have a look at it.

Dave: Yeah, we'll have a look at that in a minute, Geoff, if that's alright.

[At this point Geoff produces a butterfly bomb artefact for inspection.]

Geoff: Can you understand now — I can see it and it brings memories back — but this one doesn't look like what I remember. It was just a lump of metal to me. And I know I threw a brick at it, don't ask me why — I didn't think it was a bomb, because I hadn't heard about all the people that had been killed during the day. I mean, I could have been one of them. But I've got quite a big family that wouldn't be here now. Yeah. It's exactly as I remember it. That one's from Grimsby. Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it? None of us thought it was a bomb — my father didn't, her father didn't, you know. But that was the morning they dropped them.

Dave: So, we'll show you a couple more things — original butterfly bombs from Grimsby.

Geoff: Yeah, that's it now, yeah. I remember, because the one I picked up wasn't quite like that — but I know now. That's how they were, that's how they come down, and then they landed like that all over the town. Mainly the top of town area, but as I say, Ainsley Street — I was told quite a lot came down around that area — Abbey Road too. And several people got killed on Cromwell Road, and what's the other one...

Dave: Yarborough?

Geoff: Eh? Yarborough Road. No — you come down Dudley Street into Cromwell Road. It was round Cromwell Road. But it's completely different now. It was all fields in those days. Big cattle market, no houses.

Anyway. What was I? How old was I? I think I was about 13. So the war had been on two or three years, hadn't it?

Dave: Can you remember any of the damaged buildings — those that caught fire, those that were bombed in the town?

Geoff: No, I heard of them but I believe Boulevard Avenue, Elsenham Road that side, and then the other side — the centre of town, Doughty Road, that area — Ainsley Street, I believe, got the majority of them. But what I was told, most people that did get killed were early morning — people cycling to work, laid on the path, laid on the road. I've got a friend in Peterborough, same age as me, and we keep in contact. He remembers the butterfly bombs well. He didn't have any experience like I had, but he knows all about them 'cause I've mentioned it a few times.

Dave: Can you remember Weelsby Old Hall on Weelsby Road? That burnt down because of incendiaries during the butterfly bomb raid.

Geoff: Yeah. I know all about that area because the Italians had a prisoner-of-war camp at that place on Weelsby Road. Of course that's before the butterfly bombs. We had them there, and then they marched them all through the town to the railway station. But some settled here — they were working on the land, and nobody seemed to really consider them a threat, not like Germans. There was one came to meet a Grimsby woman who only lived down the road, and he ended up getting married and staying in Grimsby. I'm sure there were Italians there — I don't want to say something I haven't got right.

Dave: Didn't they just have a yellow diamond on their back, can you remember?

Geoff: I can't remember that, no, to be honest.

Dave: And did you ever go down to the seafront during the war — down to Cleethorpes Prom?

Geoff: Yeah, a bit. I used to go to Yarmouth as well because my dad was from there — he'd sailed from Yarmouth and settled in Grimsby. I can always remember the beach — it was all a bit like bloody Normandy, all wires and barriers and all sorts in case of an invasion, so you couldn't go on the beach. Another thing — I used to watch a few bits of dogfights. The Battle of Britain was over that area, you know, so you could see planes darting about. But I've got to say again — exciting. I wasn't scared. I thought, bloody hell, this is good. My mum and dad must have been scared to death, I think, but at 9, 12, 13 — we weren't frightened. I can't think of any of the kids that were. It was a bit of an adventure, during the war.

Could you just go down West Hill Road — all the lorries were going there — it's still there now, but it wasn't built then. Cambridge Road was a farm, Gowers Farm I'm sure it was called, in the early part of the war. All fields. And in this street, past the shops, there was a fire station on the left before the college schools. Chelmsford School got built after. We went around the corner to Armstrong Street because Clifton Road was there — so there was rivalry between the kids from Chelmsford Avenue and the Clifton Road gang, throwing bricks at one another, charging them and then running when they turned round and chased us back down. Kids' stuff — it was paradise. No cars, very few cars. We played in the street all the time.

The girls played on the path — skipping, hopscotch and God knows what. There's a 90-year-old woman across the road there — you went to see her, didn't you? She's still alive but bedridden. She's living in the house she was born in; her mother and father were in it, then she got married, and she's still there. Her grandson looks after her. I got invited to her 90th birthday two weeks ago, and she remembered the family across the road from number 12. Everybody's moved over the years. I had an auntie lived next door, and her husband was a prisoner of war — got caught in France at Dunkirk, so he was away all the war.

Dave: Yeah. Where did you go for entertainment? Did you go to a theatre or cinema?

Geoff: Cinemas. Saturday morning, kids' things — people, girls tied to the railway line with the Arabs coming running. Watch next week — do you know what I'm saying?

Dave: Was it a big cinema, the Chantry?

Geoff: No, it was in Cartergate — it's been pulled down. That new lawyers' place just near the subway. The Chantry was just... there was a billiard hall on the corner, Billy's — billiards was popular, one down Garth Lane, they were all over the town. But the big one was the one which is now McDonald's. Used to go there — they had people stood outside.

Dave: That's the Savoy on Victoria Street, isn't it?

Geoff: Yeah, Savoy, yeah.

Dave: Did you ever go in there?

Geoff: Oh yeah, took my girlfriend in there, didn't I? And then the Queen's Cinema down Alexander Road — that was a popular cinema. The organ came up and we all had a sing-song. Yeah, at wartime and just after the war, it was all singing. I'm not kidding — I can't believe everybody used to sing. Big organ come up and you'd sing all these songs. But they were on all day, so you could go in at two o'clock and stay till ten if you wanted. The commissionaire was outside — two and ninepence that way, the one-and-nines down that way, you know what I'm saying — they were all much alike. Once you was in, you generally used to eventually go, 'Come on, we've seen this,' time to go. But some stayed in, obviously — they weren't going to chuck them out. That's kids.

One thing on that same subject — some cinemas you couldn't get into on your own because you had to be with an adult. But at Binbrook there were a lot of airmen — Australians — and they'd come into town, and we used to stand outside the cinema because we couldn't get in. We'd call it a B movie or an A movie. But the airmen would check us in. 'Can you take us in, mate?' 'Yeah, come on.' And he'd go up to the desk: 'Two one-and-nines, please.' And we was in. So that was a kids' thing.

Dave: When you went to the Savoy, there used to be a cafe upstairs. Did you ever go to the cafe?

Geoff: I can't remember it specifically as a cafe, but I went upstairs a lot. It might well have been one — I can't remember that to be honest.

Dave: When you used to go up into the Victoria Street area, did you go shopping there very often?

Geoff: Yeah. You used to go to the Lyric — can you remember that? The cafe's there now.

Dave: That's opposite the Riverhead.

Geoff: Opposite the Riverhead. In fact, the building's still got 'Lyric' on it, if I remember right. But it was a small cinema. They said there were water rats running about in it! It might well have been true. It was a bug hutch, like — tiny little place, but it was a cinema. They were all over the town, weren't they?

Dave: Did you ever go to the Palace Theatre then?

Geoff: Many times. I've acted on there.

Dave: Oh! So what was...

Geoff: I'll tell you why. I went to Nunsthorpe School and I was in the tumbling — the tumbling act. We got invited to go on stage and do this. I was the one that went right to the top. You had about six men — or boys — down below, five, four, three, two, and when you got right to the top you just used to shout and then collapse. That was one of the acts. But tumbling — one bent down, then two went down, and you jumped over. It was a school thing, Nunsthorpe School. So yeah, we used to buy things for the comedians to throw at the audience. Catcalling. Many of them packed the Palace — all the top ones came there: Laurel and Hardy, all the top ones came to the Palace Theatre.

Dave: It was grand inside, the theatre, was it?

Geoff: Yeah, yeah, it was. And they had a balcony as well. I'm telling you as a child, but like I said — when I was at school we performed on the stage there as a tumbling act. The school organised it; you'd go into the Palace Theatre. We'd practised it in the gym at school for months before.

Dave: Did you ever go to the Empire Theatre in Cleethorpes?

Geoff: Yeah, bloody loads of times. Or was it — somebody — I forgot his name, but he had acts on there, down by the railway station, just round the back.

Dave: Do you mean Jimmy Slater? Jimmy Slater?

Geoff: Yeah.

Dave: He had Slater's Follies — used to be on the prom.

Geoff: Yeah, that used to be on the beach a bit. And the pier had acts on all the time, years ago. So we used to go on the pier. But the most famous one for us was the Cafe Dansant, down the bottom of the Winter Gardens. We preferred the Cafe Dansant when we were younger, you know. But there was quite a lot of life in Cleethorpes. There was a dance hall on the high street — it's still there, I think, isn't it? Like a church thing?

Dave: Was it the Coliseum?

Geoff: The Coliseum, yeah.

Dave: So it was a dance hall when you went there?

Geoff: Well, I used to go dancing there. Because when I was about 17, 18, I loved dancing. Used to go to the Gaiety. And Americans were all here — there was quite a lot of Americans, and several of the girls around here married Americans, GI brides. I kept in touch with one or two. There's a friend of mine — he painted me a picture of Grimsby. He painted Keith Bald at the corner — he only lives round there, he's an artist. And he put my name on it, 'Thanks Geoff,' or whatever — a Grimsby Town trawler

coming in with a tug pulling it with a name on. I thought, well, that's a nice souvenir. He got me another one for me sister up the road — she only lives up the road, she's 90.

Dave: Did you ever go to the Theatre Royal at Cleethorpes?

Geoff: At where?

Dave: The Theatre Royal on Grant Street at Cleethorpes, near the railway station.

Geoff: Yeah, honestly yeah. Well, during that time we went everywhere. As I got older, I transferred a bit from the... Because I used to go dancing. I was ever mad on dancing. And it was wartime, so the Americans showed us how to do the jitterbug. But Grimsby had its own orchestra — Bob Walker — and he was big at the Gaiety. He packed the Gaiety; it was a big dance hall with a cafe at the right at the back. But what we liked as youngsters, there was an alleyway all the way down the side — everybody knew what it was for — it was called Passion Alley. It was all couples who didn't want to dance but wanted a bit of snogging in there. Different days, different days.

But you had to be ever so polite when you went to ask a girl to dance in them days. 'Could I have a dance, please?' I can't believe it was like that. That's how it was. But if you liked dancing — and I would — you'd have several steady girlfriends that you went dancing with to the Gaiety.

My mother took me on a bike originally, on a Wednesday night — it used to be old time dancing, waltzes, quickstep, all old-time dance music — and she liked dancing, that's where I got it from. And then a bit later on when I got a bit older, I didn't want to go with my mother, but that's where I first started. I also used to go to the Church House in the Bullring — can you remember that? Whist drives. So, I learned how to play whist with my mother. It was a popular place, the Bullring.

Dave: What sort of jobs did most of your neighbours do?

Geoff: Well, they were all... I can remember all the jobs. Plumber lived at the end. There was a builder. There was a window cleaner. My dad finished on the dredges in Grimsby — he'd come here as a fisherman, met my mother, and they lived in Alexander Road at first. But during the war I used to go out in the Humber with him on the dredger. The dredges filled the hoppers full of mud, and then I used to go out into the middle of the Humber. My dad used to knock the thing — two of them — and it opened up. Queer sensation. The mud all went down.

They don't do it now, I don't think, but the docks was busy. The big dredger — it was a big one. Because all the trawlers, everything coming and going all the time, hundreds of them, weren't there? You could walk across — and I'm not exaggerating; I've done it with my dad — from one trawler to another trawler across to the north wall. Massive. Massive fish dock.

And when I got a little job as a bus driver, I used to take them all to the dock tower. They were all from Sheffield and that, and I picked them up at the dock offices, single deck bus, and ran across the bridge — had to get it just between the lines — down to the dock tower. Then the Tattershall Castle going out to the forts with jazz playing. That was regular. I used to do that. As a driver I got jobs like that.

Dave: Can I just say, Geoff — going back to your driving days, you drove trolley buses, I understand.

Geoff: Yeah. Well, I started on trolley buses. Let me get you right. I come out the army — they sent me to Titans. Basically, they were doing that with everybody getting demobbed in them days, sending them to the Humber bank — Dunlop's, Courtauld's, the oil places further up. But they sent me and a bloke from the RAFO to Titans in the middle of winter. And I thought — the football field, all the edge rows white — I don't like this. I was only there a week because I went down the drains and it was all acid. So my trousers — they give you the worst jobs. But I finished up near the north wall, hammering away. And then my mate's dad was a bus driver and they were looking for staff. I said, 'Well, that'll do me, better than this.'

So I got on as a conductor first, because you wouldn't get your licence straight away. Six months there, they put me on buses to drive and I passed my test quick, got a PSV. But we had to change at Cleethorpes because Cleethorpes was a different company — Blue Buses, Pelham Road was their depot, Victoria Street was ours. So, when you got on the bus as a conductor, you got to Park Street and had to give them another ticket. Because it was a different company.

Dave: So you drove over the border into Cleethorpes?

Geoff: Oh yeah, all the time, the trolleys, yeah.

Dave: And were the trolley buses easy to drive?

Geoff: Brilliant. Only had an accelerator and a brake — long as you kept under the wires you're all right. The wires went all the way to Cleethorpes bathing pool. And they accelerated ever so fast because there were no changing gears — just a brake pedal. All you had to do was make sure you was underneath the wire because you was running off that. And when you come to a junction, you had to take your foot off the accelerator or it would derail. There's a lot — I could talk for hours about them.

In Riby Square we used to go up and down Freeman Street. And as a bit of a joke — while the blokes were sitting in the fishermen's mission having a cup of tea on their break — we used to come out and take the rods and put them on the wires going the other way. So when the driver went down Freeman Street into Hainton Avenue, he was on the same lines as the one coming up. Big long rods fishing up — you'd have to put them on again, that's how they were. God, I must be talking a lot.

Dave: Did you drive the large twin rear axle trolley buses we used to have in Grimsby?

Geoff: Rear axle?

Dave: There used to be trolley buses in Grimsby with two wheels at the front and four wheels at the back. Did you drive those?

Geoff: Yeah, for a while.

Dave: Were they larger than the standard ones?

Geoff: Yeah, they were. I enjoyed my time as a driver — opened all sorts of things. So then I worked for Granville Tours in the 60s, went all over. Liverpool every week, Scotland, all that. If you named me a town in England, in Scotland, say it. My friends used to call me Sat Nav Geoff — because they all knew: 'I know. I've been there.' I just went all over, privately, you know.

Dave: I understand you used to drive lorries as well?

Geoff: Yeah, then I went heavy goods driver.

Dave: What sort of loads did you take?

Geoff: Fish. I took them to Birmingham, Leicester, the Midlands. Ross — no, before Ross's, Stanley Robinson. We had one lorry when I went there. They weren't going to set me on because there was a bloke in front of me in the queue, but as I'm going out the door, the gaffer says, 'Oh, I've changed my mind — two of you can go in the one lorry.' Within six years we'd got six lorries, Stan Robinson. What happened in them days — the same as happened with the trawlers — other companies bought you out. Ross Group bought Stanley Robinson. So, we expanded and then started to decline.

We had prime fish, mainly going to Greek Cypriot traders — nearly all Greek Cypriots in Leicester and Birmingham. We all got friendly with them, didn't we? I used to go to the Greek restaurants and Greek weddings when I was a HGV driver, 'cause we were all Greeks. So, we got more and more trade. So, Ross bought us out and shut us down. Well, I left just before they shut. When I worked for Stan Robinson, Stan himself and Eric Kemp really looked after us. If you were off sick, they'd come round to you with your wages. Then one day I turned in and they said, 'You're now part of Ross Group.' And I said, 'That's it.' I didn't leave them then, but I knew it was going to happen. 'We're just a number now.'

From there I went taxi driving. I got Imperial Tobacco — they'd brought Ross Group out. And they keep sending me letters to this day. It's 65 now — well, I'm 93 — and I still get a good pension. They offered me a lump sum, take it now. Two or three thousand, I

don't know what it was, but I said no. I thought, God, at 65, I'm retired — 65, 75, 85. Nearly 30 years I've been getting a pension. So, I know I did right there.

Dave: Can I ask — did you ever know a taxi driver called Alan Thicket?

Geoff: Alan Thicket? Yeah, I think it rings a bell. I was with the taxi cabs — a big firm, forty-odd years ago. There were 50 of us and I became chairman — bloody chairman of taxi cabs. Biggest taxi firm in Grimsby.

Dave: He was with Nippy Cars — or Nippy Cabs.

Geoff: Yeah, I do remember. There were a lot of separate ones — there was one down Strand Street, I forgot the name. There were a lot of small firms all over. But we were Hackney — we were on the rank — and we took Coxon's over on Brighowgate. In fact, I'm going to a bit of a do on Sunday — can you make Sunday?

Dave: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

Geoff: Jennifer can't go.

Dave: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us, Geoff?

Geoff: No, I think I've — bloody hell, got a sore throat already. There was one little story when you was on the trams — well, the trolleys. The trolleys went on a Saturday from the Old Market to the bathing pool, but Saturday was football day — Grimsby Town, wasn't it? The queues were right round St James's Church, 'cause all the buses — eight, nine routes, four or three — all came into town and you got on a trolley to carry on. So on match days there was a great mass of people all wanting to go the same way, and you couldn't get the tickets done quick enough.

So they used to have clippies walking round the queue. And my mate — he was a keen football fan — when we first started, he used to shout, 'Football only on this bus!' Well, they all wanted to go and attend anyway. So, football only — they'd all get on. And he'd say to me, 'Give me four bells if you're full.' He was a Taffy; he'd been in the Navy. So we set off, and the first stop — the Odeon bus stop — gave me four bells. They just sailed straight past. All the way, passing all these stops. I've got to say though, it wasn't a big disaster because they were running every five minutes — one was following another.

But the worst of all was when the man at the Grimsby Town station saw you coming and shut the gates again. Every train that came in from the docks had a wagon put on the back for fish to go all round the country. So, when they stopped the gates on Grimsby Docks, as drivers we were really mad. You'd be there five, ten minutes before he'd open up again. God, it used to make you mad.

And it was run like the army — the buses were. There were bus inspectors getting on all the time. I'd say 90% of them after the 50s and 60s were all ex-servicemen. And the bus inspectors — the proper military ones. So as a conductor, you kept your eye open. One or two of us had girlfriends who got on the bus regular, so you didn't give them a ticket, naturally. My wife, when she used to get on — 'Don't get a ticket for her.' When I got to the bathing pool we'd have a bit of time together, because you had a ten-minute wait. Honestly, this was regular.

So going back to football only — when we got to the Ritz, we used to pull in outside — because it was a cinema in them days — unhook the trolley, park it outside the Ritz, and all the drivers and conductors off duty would be inside watching the match. Occasionally a bus inspector would come. 'What's happened to the bus service?' 'They're all at the match.' Yeah. All watching the match. But then about ten minutes before time, you'd hook on again and off you went. You just got away with it. And the service was a five-minute service anyway, so it wasn't as if people were waiting half an hour. I mean, the bus service round here is an hour now, isn't it? But anyway, that was it. Life was completely different.

~ End of recording ~

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